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ABSTRACT

Many theories of career development are derived from theories of personality; however, broader perspectives on career development are being built on emerging research focused on gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. The main career development theories are as follows: trait and factor theories (which assumes the possibility of matching individual traits to occupational requirements); life-span theories (which take a long-term developmental perspective); and social cognitive career theory (which identifies the interaction of personal attributes, external environmental factors, and behavior in career decision making and focuses on the influence of self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations). Researchers are beginning to reexamine all three theories in terms of two concepts: career maturity (the readiness to make appropriate career decisions) and salience (the value individuals place on life roles). This research is suggesting that career choice and development are influenced by multiple factors, including experiences of sexism, racism, and classism and the salience of various life roles and identity. Recommendations include the following: career counseling should take place within the cultural context; race and ethnicity must be considered in interaction with gender and class; and a more global, inclusive perspective to career development across the life-span is needed. (Contains 14 references) (MN)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Sandra Kerka

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Career Development and Gender, Race, and Class

Many theories of career development are derived from theories of personality (Sharf 1997). They attempt to illuminate the interrelationship of individual personality and behavior with work and careers. However, some prevailing career development theories were based solely on research on white males from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds, so their applicability to women, people of color, and other socioeconomic groups has been called into question. In addition, the focus on individual psychological or personality characteristics does not take into account the wider environmental context in which people make career decisions, thus failing to recognize the constraints faced by some groups. This *Digest* investigates broader perspectives on career development that are being built on emerging research focused on gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. The implications of this information for career and vocational educators and counselors are discussed.

Issues Related to Career Development Theories

Some types of career development theories include trait and factor, life-span, and social cognitive (Sharf 1997). This section looks at some of the issues surrounding the applicability of these theories in regard to gender, race, and class.

Trait and Factor Theories. The basis of trait and factor theories is the assumption that there are unique traits that can be reliably measured and that it is possible to match individual traits to occupational requirements. Holland identified six types of occupations theorized that people seek work environments and occupations that match their preferred traits. However, some people question the accuracy of the instruments used to measure these traits for groups other than white males. Do they reflect understanding of diverse life experiences? Are the requirements for success in an occupation the same for people of color as for whites? For women as for men? (Leong 1995). Research has demonstrated real differences in the abilities of different gender, racial, and socioeconomic-groups, but what factors brought about these differences? According to Helms and Piper (in "Special Issue" 1994), there is "no valid reason for explaining or anticipating consistent between-group differences on the basis of race per se" (p. 125); such differences may result from shared cultural socialization experiences. Likewise, "differences in abilities, achievements, personality, interests, and values between men and women do exist, [but] they are often rather small" (ibid., p. 54).

Life-Span Theories. Trait and factor theories tend to deal with career issues at one point in time, whereas life-span theories take a long-term, developmental perspective (ibid.). The most widely known life-span theory is Super's Theory of Vocational Choice, which suggests that individuals pass through stages of vocational development involving developmental tasks at each stage; it also considers the performance of multiple roles and their interaction across the life-span (Stitt-Gohdes 1997). However, some studies have shown that the life stages Super outlined are not exactly applicable to women, especially as their roles have changed in the last few decades (Sharf 1997). Super considered self-concept and vocational maturity to be important determinants in occupational choices. However, the self-concept of people of color is linked to some degree to the formation of ethnic identity, the impact of which needs to be acknowledged in life-span theory (Leong 1995). Low scores on career maturity measures may be a reflection of perceived societal barriers, restricted access to and limited opportunities in the job market, or a realistic appraisal of one's prospects (Naidoo 1998).

Social Cognitive Career Theory. This theory identifies the interaction of personal attributes, external environmental factors, and behavior in career decision making. It focuses on the influence of self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations on goals and behavior (Stitt-Gohdes 1997). That is, if individuals believe in their ability to undertake an endeavor and have an expectation of the outcome of that behavior, they will behave in a way that will help them achieve their goal. However, for women and people of color, barriers such as discrimination or bias may determine outcomes independent of behavior. Self-efficacy beliefs may have been undermined by racial or sex-role stereotypes. Therefore, individuals may foreclose career options that they perceive are not truly open to them (Sharf 1997). The fact that some individuals have been able to persist and achieve in a nonsupportive environment is in some cases attributable to their high self-efficacy expectations (Farmer et al. 1997).

Critics of the major career development theories (Fitzgerald and Betz 1994; Leong 1995; Naidoo 1998; "Special Issue" 1994) charge that they are based on white, middle-class values; make certain assumptions (relative affluence, access to education and occupational information, free and open labor market, work as a central value); fail to include crucial structural and cultural variables; and include concepts not applicable to certain groups. For example, "the very notion of career development may be inappropriate for some ethnic minorities" (Perron et al. 1998, p. 410). "We do not even know to what extent the term 'career' is culturally sensible to Native people" (Peavy 1995, p. 1). Fitzgerald and Betz (1994) question the relevance of career development to people who are permanently unemployed or underemployed. Naidoo (1995) critiques research that measures minority groups against white, middle-class norms (any differences being attributed to race) and studies that confound race with social class. However, many authors agree that these theories have some utility and need to be expanded and elaborated to include relevant variables (Fitzgerald and Betz 1994; "Special Issue" 1994). The following sections look at two of a number of concepts that are being used to reexamine these theories for wider application: career maturity and salience.

Career Maturity

Career maturity is the readiness to make appropriate career decisions (Lundberg et al. 1997). It has often been measured using majority populations as the norm, but research on diverse populations demonstrates that some of the variables used to measure it may not apply to all groups (Leong 1995). Career maturity is influenced by age, race, ethnicity, locus of control, socioeconomic status, work salience, and gender (Naidoo 1998). The complex interaction of these factors affects individuals' readiness to succeed in mastering the tasks appropriate to various stages of career development. Perron et al. (1998) found that minority students in Quebec had higher ethnic identity and vocational maturity earlier than the majority population but their maturity scores fell behind by 11th grade. They suggested that increased ethnic identity may lead to greater awareness of potential barriers and thus lower career maturity. In Lundberg et al.'s (1997) study, Anglo ninth-graders had higher career maturity scores than Mexican-American students, which they attributed to the latter's limited access to information

about the world of work. They also found significant differences between the two groups on the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, highlighting the key influence of personality on career maturity.

Some studies fail to show that socioeconomic status (SES) has a significant influence on career maturity (Naidoo 1998), but others suggest that such concepts as career exploration and planning may not apply to poor individuals who may leave school to take jobs for economic survival (Sharf 1997). Rojewski (1994) found that adolescents from low-income backgrounds score lower on career maturity measures, which he attributed to lack of access to occupational information, role models, and the perceived lack of employment opportunities, all of which influence career choice. Although low-income youth often have high aspirations, the influence of inadequate guidance and lack of information, high school preparation, or role models affects their "fit" with the career maturity model.

Career maturity research shows conflicting results for gender, some studies finding higher levels in males, others in females (Naidoo 1998). Again, the complex interaction of other influences may make career maturity development different for women and men. Although women in Luzzo's (1995) study had higher career maturity scores than men, they were more inclined to perceive role conflicts and barriers as obstacles in their career development process. Women may balance their career preferences with what seems possible, regardless of whether their career behavior is appropriate for their career development stage (Farmer et al. 1997).

Salience

Salience refers to the value individuals place on life roles (study, work service, home/family, leisure), which can change over time (Sharf 1997). In addition to these roles, the salience of racial/ethnic identity is emerging as an important dimension in explaining career development. A "Special Issue" (1994) of the ***Journal of Vocational Behavior*** explored the role of racial identity in career behavior. In this issue, Cross presented the Nigrescence model, a continuum of African American identity in which individuals range from placing low to high salience on being black. Traditional career development theory may apply to blacks with low salience (whose world view is similar to whites) but not to blacks whose world view is more Africentric (Parham and Austin in "Special Issue" 1994). Evans and Herr (ibid.) found that high salient racial identity did not predict career aspirations of African Americans, suggesting the importance of considering personal identity factors.

Leong and Chou (ibid.) found that a continuum of acculturation/ethnic identity influences the vocational behavior and career choices of Asian Americans. Similarly, the salience of Native Americans' world view compared to that of the dominant culture affects their view of work (Leong 1995). The degree of acculturation, or the extent to which individuals adopt dominant cultural values (Carter and Cook 1992), may determine the fit of traditional career development theories. For others, bicultural competence, or the reconciliation of the values of one's culture with the dominant culture, explains career development patterns (Leong 1995; Peavy 1995).

For some the salience of the family influences career behavior. Different cultures have different conceptions of the family, gender roles, and family-work relationships. In some cultures, "career" may have a collective, not an individual meaning (Carter and Cook 1992). "African Americans expressed greater salience in home and family than the work role" (Naidoo et al. 1998, p. 23).

Several authors point out the great diversity in world view, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status *within* groups such as Hispanic, Asian, African, and Native Americans (Leong 1995; Peavy 1995; "Special Issue" 1994). Therefore, race/ethnicity should not be used as a primary signifier of career behavior, and it is important to look at the conditions under which membership in a particular group is salient.

Summary

As career development theories are tested by research on various populations, a complex picture emerges, suggesting that career choice and development are influenced by multiple factors: personality (including vocational interests); how individuals perceive themselves and the world (self-concept, racial/cultural identity, world view); socialization; resources (financial, information, role models, social supports); experiences of sexism, racism, and classism; and the salience of various life roles and identity. Betz and Fitzgerald (in Leong 1995) recommend the following: (1) career counseling must take place within the cultural context, with counselors being aware of their own and others' cultures; (2) assumptions that all individuals in a culture have the same values, goals, and experiences should be avoided; (3) race and ethnicity must be considered in interaction with gender and class; and (4) the level of acculturation and stage of ethnic identity development should be identified. Stitt-Gohdes (1997) notes that "students of all ages spend much more of their time with the classroom teacher than the guidance counselor" (p. 54). Teachers (as well as parents) should also look at students as individuals who are also members of multiple subgroups within the context of the broader society. A more global, inclusive perspective can help all individuals with their career development across the life-span.

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